



Open access

The debate on “open access” is now well under way. To briefly recapitulate the story: commercial publishers of scientific journals are being strongly criticized for profiteering by charging excessively high prices for subscriptions, hence a new model for scientific publishing is proposed, in which papers are essentially deposited in an electronic archive, from which anyone can access them free of charge.

“Open access” sounds like a very good idea in principle. After all, most scientific research is publicly funded, so why shouldn't the public be able to access it freely? Of course they can, even under present arrangements: there are many publicly accessible libraries holding subscriptions to scientific journals (and it is surely not unreasonable to expect to have to pay for a photocopy), and most capital cities in Europe, at any rate, have a least one library holding practically all scientific journals—the Patent Office library in London, the Academy of Sciences in Budapest, and so on.

The problem seems to be rather that many university libraries find it difficult to afford to pay for ever more expensive journal subscriptions. On the other hand, there are already plenty of journals published by learned societies, usually charging much less for subscriptions. Solving the problem of unaffordability would seem to require no more effort than changing the current culture of journal publishing by boycotting the commercial publishers and sending one's manuscripts to the learned societies for publication in their journals.

The problem, however, is that in some case the commercial journals enjoy very high prestige. In that case, scientists are not going to be easily induced to forego that prestige.

Of course, the commercial/learned society divide is not always clear-cut—some learned societies have licensed a commercial publisher to take on their journals, others have formed a trading division whose activities seem to be indistinguishable from those of the commercial publisher, and so on—but these developments might be regretted only as one might lament the virtual disappearance of the amateur from the world of sport. Of greater concern is the fact that many learned societies have developed the pernicious practice of levying charges for publication, either for each printed page or only for those printed in colour, which puts the whole publishing enterprise onto the level of the paid

advertisement. This practice has little to recommend it, except possibly in the eyes of the societies' accountants.

The fact is that publishing does cost money. Office staff have to be paid to deal with submissions—which usually greatly exceed the number of papers finally accepted for publication. Papers have to be sent to reviewers, proofs have to be prepared—even if all this is mostly done electronically nowadays, the staff time involved is similar to when everything was written or typed on paper, and the files are usually printed out anyway—so only the postal services lose out. In addition, the present system relies on a vast army of academic editors and reviewers who generally do the invaluable work of reviewing and editing without payment; they merely have the satisfaction of knowing that their labours contribute to the placing of more-or-less permanent stones in the edifice of science.

The alternative to the present system is that promulgated by the so-called Open Access Movement (OAM). This foresees that authors will pay for the costs—currently estimated at one to two thousand Swiss francs per article. Yet paying to publish is wrong in principle because it puts learned publishing on the level of the advertisement. The work is thereby devalued—even if it is of high quality, as a rule it will be assumed that it is not. And where would it stop? Would scientists expect to have to pay for the privilege of giving a talk at a conference?—hence presumably the speaking slots and poster panels could be auctioned off to the highest bidder. What about books? There are many implications, and implementation of the “open access” idea would truly be a revolution—but not one with a desirable outcome.

If cost is the main issue, scientists can simply publish in journals with the lowest subscription rates, rather than the highest impact factors as at present. The impact of those journals would then quickly rise anyway. There is no need to dream up elaborate plans, extremely ill-conceived regarding their implications. Furthermore, the return to non-profit learned society publishing can, and should be, accompanied by more enthusiasm for authors to post their published papers on their own (not-for-profit) website once the printed edition has been published. Our own, and some other journals' copyright arrangements now permit this. It would appear to be a more rational approach than setting up web repositories such as BioMed Central and the Public Library of Science.

J.J. RAMSDEN

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Ramsden, Jeremy J.

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